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ABSTRACT

Aristotle's four virtues of style--clarity, propriety, dignity, and purity--can serve as a useful model for teaching and for research in linguistic style. These virtues reflect the writer's careful consideration of the subject, the audience, the writer's voice, and the linguistic community for the writing. Unfortunately, these virtues have fallen out of favor because their applications throughout history have been uneven and their uses have at times become abuses. In different periods of rhetorical history, over-zealous enthusiasm has elevated one characteristic of style to the virtual neglect of the others. However, the very fact that this framework can be used as a way of understanding the shifting tides of taste in the history of style demonstrates its value for identifying the emphases of particular theorists. If one examines the most persistent stylistic abuse of the twentieth century, the "official style," and the virtue of style most frequently cited in defense against it--clarity--one can see the value of the four virtues as correctives to the tendency to define stylistic focus too narrowly. (HOD)

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Style in Rhetorical Context: Aristotle's Four Virtues of Style and Stylistic Theory and Practice

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Comparing his own work to that of James Britton, James Moffett, and Frank D'Angelo, James Kinneavy has argued that one of the major principles unifying contemporary theories of discourse is their insistence on the importance of viewing writing in its situational or rhetorical contexts.[1] We can see this emphasis as well in the influence of articles like Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" (Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 [1968], 1-15) and Wayne Booth's "The Rhetorical Stance" (CCC, 14 [1963], 139-145) as well as in the mining of classical rhetoric for principles to guide the teaching of composition. These writers stress the complexity and importance of the audience and the writer's voice as well as the subject to successful writing. Contemporary researchers, like rhetorical theorists and historians, are interested in the effect of context on the writing processes and stylistic choices of writers. The model Linda Flower and John Hayes have developed to represent rhetorical problems ("The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," CCC, 31 [1980], 21-32) and the analysis by Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami of the justifications adult writers give for their stylistic and rhetorical choices ("Writing in a Non-Academic Setting," RTE, 16 [1982] 201-223) are just two examples of studies that acknowledge the complex relationships among writer, audience, subject, and language in any writing situation. In our classrooms, this emphasis on context is reflected in the heuristics we teach our students (which include detailed techniques for audience analysis), in the kinds of assignments we give them (which often

set up rhetorical situations with real audiences), and even in the courses we develop (our writing across the curriculum programs are attempts to place writing instruction in less isolated and artificial contexts than the composition classroom).

In our teaching of style, however, we seem not to have developed a set of principles or techniques that is consistent with our emphasis on context in other areas of composition. Our pedagogies of style are fragmented and confusing. They range from the lists of stylistic values (clarity, emphasis, variety) and precepts for improving style (avoid the passive, write naturally, shun jargon) offered by the handbooks to more systematic approaches to style (generative rhetoric, sentence combining, imitation, the "paramedic" method) which, although they improve students' ability to generate and revise their sentences, do not emphasize the sentence in its textual or rhetorical contexts. It is difficult to see in this variety of terms and precepts and approaches any coherent set of principles that could be said to guide our teaching of style in the way our emphasis on context has helped us structure other elements of our courses. Composition studies would benefit from a theoretical framework for studying style, particularly if that theory were consistent with the other theoretical assumptions that inform our teaching and research.

In A Theory of Discourse, Kinneavy has noted this absence of a useful theory of style. He observes that we have "no generally accepted framework of stylistic concepts," no "currently accepted 'model' or 'dogma' which can serve as a point of departure" for discussing style in all types of discourse (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980, p. 166). He suggests, however, that the communications triangle on which he bases his anatomy of the aims of discourse offers "a remarkably consistent matrix for characterizing some hitherto seemingly unrelated factors of style" (p. 167). In his section on persuasive

discourse, he explores the relationship between stylistic principles and the elements of the triangle or the rhetorical situation and revives a traditional matrix for style: the Aristotelian "four virtues of style." As I will argue, this matrix can serve as a useful model for our teaching and research in style.

The four virtues--clarity, propriety, dignity, and purity--derive from Book III of Aristotle's Rhetoric and, thus, have traditionally been associated largely with what Kinneavy categorizes as persuasive discourse. Kinneavy stops short of recommending the framework for non-persuasive writing and even hesitates to revive it for the language of persuasion, since historically the virtues have come to be associated with an emphasis on the separation of style into high, middle, and low "levels." His insistence on limiting the applicability of traditional rhetorical principles to a narrow range of "persuasion" and his reluctance to risk reviving historical arguments about style, however, prevent Kinneavy from exploring the usefulness of the Aristotelian virtues as a theoretical framework for discussing style in writing with a variety of aims or purposes. The four virtues provide us with a set of assumptions about style consistent with our broader assumptions about the importance of rhetorical context; they can help us bring coherence to our discussions of style and how to teach it. I hope to demonstrate the usefulness of the framework by examining its relationship to the elements of the rhetorical triangle, exploring its uses and abuses in the history of style, and using it to view some contemporary approaches to style. Finally, I will suggest how we might introduce such a set of principles into our composition courses.

As Kinneavy demonstrates, the four virtues correspond directly to the four elements of a rhetorical situation: "Clarity obviously has to do with the reality of the subject--the matter being talked about. Propriety has to

do with adaptation to the style of a particular audience involved. Dignity is concerned with the author's ability to produce a good impression by his style. . . . [Purity] is a matter of following the rules of the language involved" (p. 276). Some of these terms, of course, have synonyms that we can recognize from contemporary discussions of style. We still insist on "clarity of language" as a measure of how precisely the writer has conveyed the subject. Appropriateness, a synonym for propriety, persists in our vocabulary, although often as negative (avoid language that is inappropriate to your audience) than as positive advice (find the style most appropriate to your audience). The term "dignity" is less familiar than its synonyms "impressiveness" and "eloquence"; an element of the writer's ethos, dignity means creating a voice and using language appropriate to the situation, thus impressing the audience with the writer's careful consideration of his or her relationship to the subject and the audience and control of the structures and the effects of the language. Our contemporary synonym for purity is "correctness," although that term usually refers to correct grammar and usage alone and not to the broader sense of appropriate diction to which classical rhetoricians usually refer. Despite changes in our terminology, however, we can recognize in the four virtues a set of principles consistent with our terms for analyzing rhetorical contexts. Clarity, propriety, dignity, and purity of style reflect the writer's careful consideration of the subject, the audience, the writer's voice, and the linguistic community for the writing. Writers who attend to these considerations are able to see style as, in Richard Lanham's phrase, "a response to a situation" (Style: An Anti-textbook, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, p. 58).

If the four virtues of style form a theoretical framework for studying style consistent with our assumptions about context and as old as classical

rhetoric, why has it fallen out of favor in our research and teaching? The answer is that, like so many other theoretical systems, its applications have through history been uneven, and its uses have at times become abuses. In different periods of rhetorical history, over-zealous enthusiasm has elevated propriety or dignity or clarity or purity to the virtual neglect of the others.

The most familiar of these historical excesses in the application of the four virtues, as Kinneavy points out, is the notion of the "levels of style," reified by Cicero and persisting throughout the history of rhetoric into the twentieth century. Arguing that "the universal rule, in rhetoric as in life, is to consider propriety" and that "this depends on the subject under discussion and on the character of both the speaker and the audience,"[2] Cicero describes the features of the plain, middle, and grand styles in some detail. He concludes that the truly eloquent speaker is one "who can discuss trivial matters in a plain style, matters of moderate significance in the tempered style, and weighty affairs in the grand manner" (101). Few, perhaps, would argue with Cicero's analysis; historically, however, the levels of style developed in absolute terms as rules for mutually exclusive types of style linked to subject or genre or moral tone rather than in the relative terms suggested by the notion of appropriateness to speaker and audience. Thus, propriety lost its flexibility as an index of "fitness" to subject, writer, and audience. Richard Lanham has analyzed this reification of the levels of style and demonstrates that comparisons of the levels or types of style are almost always invidious and have led, in the twentieth century, to a cautious preference for the "middle" style (Style, pp. 44-68). The levels of style have thus tended to obscure the rich diversity implied in the notion of appropriateness.

The rigid division of style into levels and the assignment of particular features to one or the other level has at times helped to produce an excessive emphasis on dignity or impressiveness, as a quality of the high or "grand" style. Aristotle recognizes the complex relationship of dignity to the other virtues of style; clarity, purity, and appropriateness demand that, for most occasions, the speaker should choose ordinary language in common and current use, since audiences "grow suspicious of an artificial speaker and think he has designs on them."[3] Yet Aristotle recognizes that audiences are often pleased by uses of the extraordinary; in his words, "hearers are struck by what is out of the way, and like what strikes them" (14046). The challenge to the author, then, is to balance impressiveness against clarity, purity, and appropriateness: "Good composition will have an air of novelty, while the art can escape notice and the style is clear" (1404b).

Later rhetoricians and other authors, however, put much more emphasis on impressiveness; the tradition of Ciceronisn imitation that reached its height in the Renaissance, for example, with its emphasis on copie or fullness and eloquence, was accused of reducing rhetoric to style, style to the achievement of eloquence through schemes and figures of speech, and eloquence to the study of "mere ornament." One of the chief critics of this tradition, Francis Bacon, described the excesses of the figurists in this way:

> men began to hunt more for words than matter; and more after the choiceness of the phrase, and the round clean composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying and illustration of their words with tropes and figures, than after the weight of matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgment.[4]

Reaction against such excess led, especially in the seventeenth century,

to assertions that writing should eschew all attempts at eloquence and that scientific writing, at least, should strive "to reject all amplifications, digressions, and swellings of style, to return back to the primitive purity and shortness, when men have delivered so many things in almost in an equal number of words." The words are Thomas Sprat's, in the most famous passage of his History of the Royal Society (ed. Jackson I. Cope, St. Louis: Washington University Studies, 1958, p. 113).

The formulation of Sprat and others that language should strive for " so many things in as many words" represents an excessive accommodation of style to clarity alone, especially in an attempt to represent a "new," empirically discovered "reality." For classical rhetoricians, clarity was achieved by more complex means than the reductive association of things with words. Aristotle recommends the use of appropriate metaphors and epithets to clarify the issues of a speech; for him, clarity seems to be a matter of choosing from among alternatives the words that will best evoke the issue for the audience. As he says, "one word may come clearer than another to the thing described, may be more like it, and, being more akin to it, may set it more distinctly before our eyes" (1405b). Nowhere does he stress simplicity as a device for achieving clarity--only appropriateness to the subject and the audience--nor does he, as Sprat does, recommend an atavistic reversion to the primitive. Yet it is clear how overemphasis on impressiveness can lead to a similarly excessive emphasis on clarity as the single virtue of good prose.

"Purity," like clarity, has been valued above the other features, notably by George Campbell, whose Philosophy of Rhetoric sets up three criteria for "purity of language"; our words, he says, should be in "national," "current," and "reputable" use (reputable defined as words "authorized as good by the writings of a great number, if not the majority, of celebrated authors").[5]

While for classical rhetoricians "purity" often had nationalistic overtones and was invoked to deplore the importation of foreign phrases or recent coinages, for Campbell and others the notion becomes a rallying cry for establishing standards of "good usage," apart from considerations of clarity, dignity, or propriety.

Surveying the historical abuses of the Aristotelian virtues may at first appear to diminish the theoretical adequacy or practical use of this framework for studying style. However, the very fact that we can use it as a way of understanding the shifting tides of taste in the history of style demonstrates the value of the perspective it offers us for identifying the emphasis of particular theorists. We can also use this perspective to view the emphases of style pedagogy in our own time, once again discovering the limitations of narrow emphasis on a single stylistic virtue.

If we examine the most persistent stylistic abuse of the twentieth century, the "official style," and the virtue of style most frequently cited in defense against it, clarity, we can see the value of the four virtues as a corrective to our tendency to define our stylistic focus too narrowly. That accumulation of tangled sentences and confusing language that Richard Lanham has called the official style is characterized by extreme impersonality and its attendant features (such as abstract diction, overuse of the passive voice, and awkward syntactic relationships). This excessive style has been attributed by theorists to a variety of causes. Lanham suggests that the official style reflects writers' attempts to signal their own and their subjects' importance: "At its best, it wants to tell you how it <u>feels</u> to be an official, to project the sense of numinous self-importance officialdom confers. It wants to make a prosaic world mysterious" (<u>Revising Prose</u>, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979, p. 65). Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams have attributed fondness for what

they call "nominal style" to, among other things, English teachers' too close adherence to the language of the professional communities to which they belong. In analyzing stylistic preferences, Hake and Williams argue, we should not "entirely ignore the ethnographic fact that professional castes require their own style of discourse.... many professionals will, when asked, choose a nominal passage over a parallel verbal passage because the nominal sounds to them more professional" ("Style and Its Consequences," CE, 43 [1981], 455, n.2). Walker Gibson, interested in the demands often placed on his "stuffy talkers," argues that while some stuffy talk (like the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Lung Cancer) may be a legitimate response to complexities of audience, subject, or writing-by-committee, most examples (like the impersonal language of a college admissions bulletin) result from a failure to acknowledge these same complexities (Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, pp. 91-101).

If we appeal to the four virtues of style to classify the assumptions these critics of style bring to their analyses, we discover that Lanham sees in the official style too much reliance on dignity or impressiveness; his official stylists go too far in making the ordinary seem extraordinary. Hake and Williams' analysis suggests among English teachers a too narrow standard of "purity"--that is, a shared but mistaken notion of what is "reputable." Gibson faults stuffy talk for its failure to accommodate itself to the audience and context, clearly a failure of appropriateness. All three analyses are surely valid; through mistaken notions of what constitutes dignity, purity, and propriety, official stylists sacrifice clarity on the altar of pomposity, jargonizing, and solipsism.

If the official style results from such a complex set of causes, then the solution to this stylistic problem would seem to entail recognition of

the complexity of all rhetorical and stylistic choices. We might ask writers to re-examine the relationships among themselves, their subjects, their audiences, and their language--to consider the context for their writing and how it can help them make stylistic choices. Methods designed to correct the extremes of nominal or official stylists, however, do not take writers back to considerations of context; instead, they often overemphasize the virtue of clarity. Lanham, in Revising Prose, offers writers his Paramedic method, which has as its major principle "make it clear who is kicking who" (p. 6). Williams, in Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace (Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman, 1981, pp. 9-16), provides a more flexible but still incomplete principle for revision that draws on the theory of case grammar: whenever possible, make the subject-verb-object of the sentence correspond to the agent-action-goal pattern of the sentence's semantic deep structure. Each of these writers establishes a formula that comes close to the ideal of the Royal Society, "so many things in as many words." Clarity of subject (and a narrow standard of clarity at that) becomes the primary virtue of style, and the other elements of the context are left out of consideration. While Lanham does explore the question of correct usage in his discussion of jargon and Williams does move on from clarity to "grace" (read "dignity"), their advice is not grounded in discussions of the larger rhetorical context and the constraints it places on style. Thus these texts actually offer writers a choice between competing stylistic principles (dignity or purity, clarity or grace) and stop short of linking stylistic choices to the complex rhetorical forces that writers on the job (potential official stylists, all) constantly face.

Of course, if all our advice emphasized clarity, then our students would have a well-defined, if limited, sense of the demands of style. However, the "revision stylistics" of Lanham and Williams is only one of the many strategies

for improving style that we employ in our teaching. Other strategies and other textbooks give different kinds of advice which, if we examine it carefully, demonstrates the confusing range of assumptions about style that operate in the field.

Sentence combining, for example, teaches purity and dignity; it encourages students to master the full range of options for well-formed sentences in English and to employ them with care and variety that will impress the reader with the writer's virtuosity. Because most sentence-combining exercises are practiced outside any rhetorical context with a subject unknown or unfamiliar to the writer, these exercises cannot give students a sense of the accommodation of style to a particular audience or the fitting of structure to subject implied in notions of propriety and clarity. Christensen's generative rhetoric of the sentence suffers from the same limitations. Interestingly, it is based on a notion of purity that George Campbell would find familiar; the free modifiers in Christensen's cumulative sentences are recommended as the structure most frequently used by reputable twentieth-century American writers ("Notes Toward a New Rhetoric," CE, 25 [1963], 7-18). Exercises in sentence imitation generally create a dignity that impresses readers with the writer's mastery and care of the language; because they are free of any context, they cannot reinforce the writer's attention to propriety or clarity, although they can encourage both senses of purity--the correct form of the sentences to be imitated and the types of sentences sanctioned by the current taste in style. All of these strategies, while demonstrating one or two stylistic considerations, limit students' sense of what constitutes "good style." They teach students structures but few principles for deciding when to employ them, and they encourage the kind of elaborated and complex style that revision stylistics, with its attention to sentence reduction and clarity, strives to eradicate.

While they are limited, these pedagogies at least choose a stylistic virtue and stick with it; students' style will improve, although that improvement will occur along the lines of the virtue the system is designed to reinforce. Less helpful--perhaps of no help at all--are the lists of qualities for "sentence effectiveness" that, with the requisite number of exemplary sentences, fill up the columns of handbooks. Giving little guidance in how and when to strive for these qualities, textbooks list such qualities as variety, rhythm, and economy without indicating how these qualities are tied to the larger considerations of clarity, dignity, and propriety (to the particular relationships among subject, writer, and audience in a particular writing situation). Variety, for example, is not a virtue in itself but testifies to the writer's attention to the audience (don't bore the reader with a monotonous style), the subject (don't use the same structure to reflect relationships of different types within the subject), or the ethos created in the text (don't make the reader think you lack "syntactic maturity" or are indifferent to style). Similarly rhythm, an effect of pitch and stress in all prose, can be manipulated in a particular piece as a function of a number of considerations: the impressiveness of the writer's ear for language; the clarity achieved by letting language recreate the sequence or natural sounds of the subject; or the appropriateness of using emphatic rhythms to attract the attention or strengthen the memory of a particular audience (the inattentive audience of television commercials, say, or the young child with an untrained eye and ear). Economy, usually described as a simple equation of words to things, may or may not reinforce clarity, depending on the shape of the subject as the writer perceives it, and often contradicts the advice to make one's prose rhythmic and varied.

More inadequate even than these lists of qualities for sentence effective-

ness are the lists of precepts, the do's and dont's for writers, which are always oversimple and which parade as rules the kinds of decisions that are in reality variable responses to a rhetorical context. In our students' collective memories, admonitions like "never use the passive," "don't use 'I' or 'you,'" and "use specific words" reflect our tendency, when pushed to rule-making, to describe a single style with one voice for the writer (formal) speaking to one kind of audience (distant) about one kind of subject (stable, concrete "reality").

Assuming a single standard for "good style" is, of course, inconsistent with our assumptions about the importance of context to successful writing. Using the Aristotelian virtues to guide discussions of style can help us correct our tendency to teach style as an arhetorical set of rules. The virtues remind us that stylistic choices are always relative to the context and that important decisions are made early in the writing process, when the writer is exploring the subject, analyzing the situation, determining the purpose, and deciding on the voice for the writing.

We can best introduce the framework of the four virtues early in a writing course by studying a variety of styles within their rhetorical contexts, giving students a vocabulary for analyzing and evaluating individual writer's choices. Propriety dictates that writers choose their voices carefully, but because inexperienced writers often have difficulty "hearing voices" and because experienced writers are often tied to a single voice, we need to give them practice analyzing a range of voices and the stylistic features that create them. Walker Gibson's examples of tough, sweet, and stuffy prose demonstrate three different stances writers can take towards their audiences and offer grounds for judging their appropriateness. Annette Bradford and Merril Whitburn's analysis of five passages for different audiences by the

same author on the same subject offers another opportunity for discussing how changes in style are created by changes in audience ("Analysis of the Same Subject in Diverse Periodicals," The Technical Writing Teacher, 9 [1983], 58-64). Examples such as these suggest the importance of audience for large and small stylistic choices and demonstrate as well the meaning of "propriety."

In addition, such contrasting examples shed light on the meaning of clarity, especially its relationship to audience and purpose. The passages by Fred. A. Brown on "biological clocks" that Bradford and Whitburn collect all discuss the same subject, but the shape and extent of the subject varies as Brown reports his research to colleagues in Physical Zoology or entertains the readers of the Saturday Evening Post with his descriptions of the wonders of nature. (pp. 60-63) "Clarity of subject" in these articles means creating an image for the reader rather than duplicating point for point the "reality" of the subject outside the text. Comparing passages such as these demonstrates that clarity can be defined only in terms of how a particular writer has "invented" a particular subject for a particular audience and must be judged within those constraints.

Examining a range of different styles and voices can also introduce students to the virtues of dignity and purity, which have in recent decades been emphasized less than appropriateness and clarity. The impression created by a writer can be linked to particular features of style as well as features of argument and must be understood in light of audience and subject; Gibson's analyses and terminology are useful for describing and responding to the impressions writers create of themselves. Aside from considerations of grammatical and mechanical error, correctness or purity of language can be judged not against an abstract standard of "correct usage" but in terms of the

linguistic community of the readers for which a writer writes. Brown's use of the phrase "biological clocks," for example, could be considered "pure" for Saturday Evening Post readers, while his phrase "the primary timer for long-cycle biological rhythms" is equally current, national, and reputable for readers of Physical Zoology (pp. 60 and 63), although the two phrases are clearly not interchangeable.

Analyzing a range of styles in a variety of contexts demonstrates that no single consideration dictates "good style" but that propriety, clarity, dignity, and purity reflect the equally important considerations of audience, subject, writer, and language. Once these notions are established, students have a framework for analyzing and evaluating the writing of others and making their own stylistic choices. If we include analysis of professional or student writing in our courses, this background gives us a way to discuss stylistic choices by discovering not merely what is effective in a piece of writing but why it is effective--as a recognition of the readers' attitudes or knowledge, as a structure for clarifying the nature of the subject, as a gesture toward establishing the dignity of the subject or the author, as an acknowledgement of the linguistic community which reader and writer share. If we use the techniques of "generative stylistics," providing students with model structures through sentence combining or Christensen rhetoric or exercises in imitation, we can go beyond discussions of correctness and dignity to account for the propriety or clarity of a particular structure in a particular context. If we use techniques of revision stylistics like those proposed by Lanham and Williams, students will have the means for judging whether the revisions produced by these writers' formulas are appropriate and dignified as well as clear and correct. And when we evaluate our students' writing, we will have a vocabulary and a set of criteria more powerful than the single standard of "purity" that too often operates in our comments to students. We can bring

together our evaluations of "content" and "form" by using considerations of the rhetorical context as a standard for evaluating style.

We need a theory, both in our scholarship and in our teaching, to unify the disparate and often contradictory discussions of style that abound in our journals and in our textbooks. If we can discover a theory of style consistent with our assumptions about the constraints of rhetorical situations and the process of writing, then that theory will be all the more useful and powerful. As I have argued here, perhaps we need not "discover" such a theory at all. We need only rediscover a system of stylistic principles that, happily, is consistent with our other theoretical and pedagogical concerns.

Notes

[1] "A Pluralistic Synthesis of Four Contemporary Models for Teaching Composition," in Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition, eds. Aviva Feedman and Ian Pringle (Conway, AK: L & S Books, 1980), pp. 51-52.

[2] Orator, trans. H. M. Hubbard, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), paragraph 72.

[3] Lane Cooper, trans., The Rhetoric of Aristotle (Englwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1932), paragraph 1404b.

[4] The Advancement of Learning, quoted in E. P. J. Corbett, Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 283.

[5] Ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), pp. 141-151.